

unpack your heart by orphan_account

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Summary:

They say home is where your heart is, and sometimes it takes a while to find exactly where that is. (Soulmate AU)

unpack your heart

Author's Note:

season two :')

this is part two of a soulmate au i wrote last year, but you can read this alone (though reading the first one would be nice too and can give a little more context). hope you like it!

A whole new chapter of Mike's life begins when Eleven walks through the door.

The moment he realizes she's there is the very same moment all the colors in Mike's life fall back in, returning like puzzle pieces that have too long been mismatched and lost.

It reminds him of the first time he ever saw colors. He remembers the shadows and the rain dancing against the outline of a girl scared and lost in the woods. He remembers the vibrant colors splashing against the world around him, taking him aback. And things have changed a lot since that night, but one thing remains the same.

"Eleven."

"Mike."

Her eyes are trained at his—brown and soft and warm and everything he's remembered to have missed. His chest fills with a warmth that feels like an old friend. He smiles, tries to steady his own heartbeat, and lets himself get lost in her embrace.

And she looks different now—cooler than before, even. Her hair has grown a little bit, she's gotten a little taller (he can say the same about himself), and something about her seems less scared and more daring. But amidst it all, it's still her. It's still Eleven.

And she's here, she's finally here, she's with him, she's safe, she's okay, she's alive—she's *here*.

Mike feels a tear slide down his cheek and he wipes it off before letting go to face her. She's real. She's here. Her smile is soft, and Mike's honestly just trying to keep his heart from fluttering too much at this point. For a moment, she's the only thing that matters.

"I never gave up on you," he says, and he's still surprised that she's standing right in front of him. The colors surrounding her take their respective places, red to brown to yellow to black. Will's drawings haunt him in the background, but he pushes those thoughts aside for now. "I called you every night. Every night for—"

"Three hundred and fifty-three days," she finishes for him. "I heard."

Mike looks at her. What? "Why didn't you tell me you were there? That you were okay?"

"Because I wouldn't let her," Hopper interrupts and Mike's eyes snap to his. His fingers clench.

Hopper walks over to Eleven. "The hell is this? Where have you been?"

"Where have *you* been?" she retorts.

Hopper puts an arm over her shoulders and hugs her.

"You were hiding her! You've been hiding her this whole time!" Mike shoves him, making him stumble backward.

Hopper glares at him. "Hey!" He grabs Mike's arm. "Let's talk. *Alone.*"

He drags him into Will's room, drawings all over the place. It's dimly lit, but Mike can see things quite clearly.

"*Protecting* her? Protecting her!" Mike exclaims accusingly. He pushes against Hopper angrily.

Hopper tries to calm him down. "Listen," he says sternly. "Listen to me."

Mike stops for a moment.

“The more people know about her, the more danger she’s in, and the more danger you and your family are in—”

“Oh, what? Should I be thanking you?” Mike retorts.

“I’m not asking you to thank me. I’m asking you to understand,” Hopper says, sounding tired.

Understand? He wants Mike to *understand*? There’s nothing to understand! Hopper kept El away from him, he knew she was alive this entire time, and he didn’t say a single word! She’s his soulmate! He thought she was dead for almost a year—he spent every single night trying to reach her! How can he understand that?

“I don’t! I don’t understand!”

Hopper sighs and takes hold of Mike’s arms. “That’s fine, that’s fine! Just do not blame her, all right? She’s upset enough as it is.”

(There will never be a universe in which Mike blames Eleven for any of this.)

“I don’t blame her! I blame you!” he shouts. “I blame *you*!”

“That’s okay, kid,” Hopper says, his voice lower. “That’s okay.”

“No! Nothing about this is okay! Nothing about this is okay!”

Mike lunges forward and punches Hopper’s arm—hard and fast.

Hopper stumbles back. “Oh, shit—”

“Liar!” he screams. He shouts curses and words and ignores Hopper’s attempts to get him to stop. He can feel the tears streaming down his face, but he keeps pushing forward.

Hopper finally grabs hold of his arms, steadying him. “It’s okay, kid. You’re okay.”

And no, he’s not okay. He doesn’t feel okay. Nothing is okay. He might lose his best friend and the world might end. He just found out that the girl he’s been pining over was hidden from him this entire

time and now he's here and she's here and she's safe but they might all die—

"I'm sorry, kid," Hopper says softly. "I'm sorry."

And it's somewhere along the tears and the screams that Mike realizes that Hopper is right. If El had come back to him, if she showed up at his door, he wouldn't have let her leave the house that much to protect her—he would've done the very same damn thing.

"You're okay," Hopper mumbles and Mike sags a little. He's tired. He's tired of all of this. He just wants it to be over. He's angry and exhausted and sad and relieved.

He wants his best friend back, he wants Will to be okay. He wants to kill the monster, to never let it hurt anyone ever again. He wants to be with Eleven, to tell her how much he's missed her and how he never lost hope of seeing her again. And she's here now, and that's all that really matters. She's safe now.

(Okay, so maybe not that safe. They've still got a shadow monster to defeat, but it's still something.)

When he comes out of the room with Hopper, everyone is standing around the table to form a plan. Close the gate, just like Will had told them to. Eleven and Hopper are going to go back to the lab, Jonathan and Mrs. Byers are going to help Will, and he's going to stay here with the others.

He just hopes everything goes well.

"Just be careful, all right? I can't lose you again," he tells her. Cold air surrounds him, suffocating him like the thought of her slipping away from him again.

"You're not going to lose me." Her words reassure him, even by just the slightest bit.

"You promise?"

She nods. "Promise," she says, and he knows how much this means to both of them.

“You’re my colors, El,” he whispers to her and everything around her is just so vibrant and real. There’s something lighter that surrounds them now that they’re together again. “Come back home, okay?”

She squeezes his hand and offers a small smile. And then Mike’s leaning forward and his heart is racing, and she’s right there—

“El, come on, let’s go. It’s time,” Hopper says, and then they’re back to standing on the porch, on the brink of the end of the world.

“You’re my colors,” she says before stepping off the porch and into the car. Mike immediately feels the loss of warmth in his hand when she lets go—an Eleven-shaped space he’s gotten familiar with over the last three hundred fifty-three days.

(He stays outside a bit longer than the rest, watches the sky roll with thunder, and hopes that Eleven keeps her promise.)

It ends quickly.

Will is okay. He’s alive and he’s safe. The shadow monster is gone, and so are the demo-dogs. The gate is closed, hopefully for good this time.

They’re all safe. Everything is okay.

When El and Hopper come back to the Byers house, Mike rushes over, throwing his arms around her and everyone around them is celebrating. Mike hugs Will, jokes with him to see him smile. Nancy comes over to embrace him, murmuring reassurances and little bits of hope. Lucas and Max beam at the sight before them, fingers intertwined. Joyce and Hopper hold each other, grinning at everyone. Jonathan and Will stand close, crying and hugging.

It calms down after a moment, and when Max’s brother comes into consciousness, they tell him to go home and tell their parents that Max is staying over at a friend’s house. Billy takes the explanation without much of a fight that they anticipated. Joyce and Jonathan go to buy some food after realizing what exactly is in the refrigerator (a revolutionary discovery, as Dustin had called it). They clean up the

house, too, picking up all the drawings and dumping it into one big trash bag. Steve treats it like a basketball game, which is fun because they get to make fun of how Dustin can't seem to aim quite properly.

Lucas and Dustin take their turns hugging Eleven, and while the reunion goes on for a bit, Mike finds himself sitting next to Max, looking a little uncomfortable. A wave of guilt washes over him.

He swallows, and turns to look at her. "Hey," he says softly, and her fiery red hair looks even brighter under the lights. "I...uh, I wanted to apologize. For, um, treating you like that. I was being too harsh, and I guess I was still sad about Eleven leaving and I took it out on you. You didn't deserve that. And if...if by some miracle you still want to join our party, I'd be the first one to welcome you. You'd make a pretty good zoomer."

Max smiles at him. "Sure. That sounds great."

"Really? Cool."

"And for the record," Max adds, and Mike sees her glance at El. "I'm glad she's back, even though she doesn't seem to like me very much."

"Just give her some time," Mike tells her. "She'll come around. You just need to show her she can trust you."

"Yeah," she says, nodding. She tilts her head to look at him fully. "You really like her, don't you? Is she...your soulmate?"

"W—what?" Mike stutters out, his cheeks immediately going red.

She raises an eyebrow. "You're not exactly subtle about it."

He raises his hands in defense. There's no getting out of this one, especially with Max. "Yeah, I do. And she is. My soulmate, I mean. But don't tell anyone, okay? I haven't told my parents yet. Or Nancy. But even if she is, so what?"

"Why don't you ask her to the Snow Ball? I hear that's coming up soon," Max suggests, and her words bring back a memory he pushed aside long ago—a small dream that he thought could never happen.

“The Snow Ball,” he repeats and his eyes wander back to where Eleven stands. She’s always looked pretty, he’s noticed, even more now. She’s bright and colorful, and her smile is soft and wide. He’s a little in love with her, he realizes. “Yeah. That sounds good.”

(Mike ends up in his room making flow charts and planning on how he’s supposed to ask her. Last year, when he brought it up, it was spontaneous, but it went pretty well. Although this time, he can’t wing it because—because well, he’s not really sure, but it feels like there’s more on the line this time around.)

It takes about a week for things to settle down. Mike and Nancy explain to their parents (who don’t really care that much) that they had just lost track of time when hanging out with their friends. Dustin tells his mom that Mews got lost in the forest and will probably never return to them, but they can get a new cat for Christmas to make things a bit better. Max doesn’t get in much trouble with her parents (or her brother, really), and Lucas tells his parents that they got too caught up in one of their games at Will’s house. Eleven moves in with Hopper at his house, which is not too far from Mike’s. She’s allowed to go outside now, but never to use her powers when there are strangers around.

Things become easier.

It becomes easier to breathe, easier to bare the weight they all carry on their shoulders.

Things continue like they always do. The party shows up at Mike’s house like always, but with Max and Eleven this time around. They get into more trouble than usual, only getting caught sometimes. It’s pretty fun with their mage and zoomer now.

Mike sits on the grass in the field one afternoon, Eleven next to him, as they watch the others run around and test the drone they created. It’s quiet mostly, and the sun is starting to set. They sit there quietly, waiting until the moon replaces the sunset.

“Mike?” El calls, reaching for his hand.

“Is everything okay?” he asks.

She nods her head and smiles at him. She points to a spot on the grass close to him. “What is that?”

Mike squints and sees what she’s referring to. He leans over and cups it in his hands, gentle and careful. Then he opens his hands to show her. “It’s a firefly.”

The small bug flickers, and El stares at it in wonder. She smiles.

“Firefly,” she repeats.

“Yeah,” he says. “If you catch a lot, you can put them in a jar and use them like a flashlight or something.”

Eleven cups another firefly into her hands. She stares at it for a while. “Pretty,” she whispers.

Mike finds himself looking at Eleven instead of the firefly in her hands, her brown curls falling into her face softly. A small smile rests on her lips, freckles dotting her cheeks into constellations. At this point, he’s not even sure how he lasted so long without her. “Yeah. Pretty.”

Eleven looks back up at him, eyes full of warmth and light. Maybe it’s him, maybe it’s the way she’s looking at him, or maybe it’s the way they both finally feel like they’re home, but somehow all the colors seem to blend into one another around them.

(And Mike knows that fireflies die easily—he knows that how easy it is for him to lose Eleven again. But this time, this time around, he’s going to hold on and never let go.)

They’re sitting in the little fort in the basement, surrounded by blankets and pillows, when Mike finds himself staring at her.

And it’s only for a brief moment, a fleeting glance as she laughs at one of his bad jokes, her head tipping back and her smile wide, when Mike feels the flutter in his stomach and realizes that he wouldn’t trade this for anything.

Eleven is looking at him after a moment, and Mike turns away quickly. His eyes catch sight of the Christmas decorations on the table and he's reminded of something else. He's suddenly nervous, his fingers turn a little cold, and his heart starts to beat a little faster (it always seems to do that when he's around her). He swallows.

It's now or never.

"Hey, El," he starts to say. Her attention is all his. He tries to not make eye contact, his fingers fidgeting. God, why can't he do this? It's just El.

(It's supposed to be easy because it's just El; the girl who's saved him too many times to count, the girl who's trusted him since the beginning, the girl who gives him butterflies in his stomach every time she looks at him, the girl who he's just a little bit in love with—)

Okay. Maybe it's not so easy.

"Mike?" she asks, her voice soft. The sunlight that streams through the windows makes her hair look a little golden, her little curls framing her face in all the right places, softening her eyes. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," he replies because everything is *fine, really, it is*. "Everything's good. I, um...I just, I wanted to ask you something."

She nods and offers him a small smile, and Mike doesn't mention that it's too cute for him to handle. "Okay."

"So um. Crap, I don't know how I'm supposed to say this. I...I..." Mike takes a shaky breath, laughing nervously. His hands won't stop moving. "Okay, I actually had a plan, but I think I'm just gonna wing this because uh. I don't think my mouth's working very well."

This should be easier the second time around, shouldn't it?

"Mike?" she asks, worried. She places her hand on his. "It's okay."

He nods. Taking in a deep breath, he says. "Yeah, yeah. Yes. Okay, okay. So you know how the guys and I are going on Christmas break soon, right?" he starts. "We won't be going to school for a while."

They've also been teaching Eleven things they know, basic stuff like numbers and words. They teach her she needs to know if she's ever going to start school, though it won't be for a while. She's still got a lot more to go through, though she is a fast learner.

"Yeah, so, um, the Snow Ball is gonna happen before we go on break. And I was, um," he pauses, and breaks eye contact. He swallows. "I was, uh...I was just wondering if you'd...if you'd maybe wanna go. To the dance." He rubs the back of his neck. "I mean, you don't have to go with *me*, obviously. But, um. I know it's a school event, but the teachers probably won't even notice if you're there and you're not a student, but uh...I was just hoping you'd want to come to the dance. I did promise you that before, and friends don't break promises."

After a moment, she squeezes his hand and nods slowly. "Okay."

Mike grins, and just the thought of maybe getting a chance to dance with her once makes him happier than he'd like to admit. "Yeah? You'll go?"

Eleven nods and Mike grins. The room around him lightens, swirling in different colors toward one direction—toward one person.

"That's great!" he exclaims. "It'll be really, really fun."

She smiles, and it's enough for Mike to hold on to every day when he wakes up.

(He sleeps without nightmares for the first time that night.)

He almost thinks she won't show up that night.

While each of his friends are swept away towards the dance floor, Mike finds himself sitting down at one of the chairs laid out. He watches his friends dance; he sees Lucas and Max fumble together, watches Will and a girl from his math class speak to one another softly, and holds back a smile when he sees that Nancy is dancing with Dustin.

It's a little after that when he decides to panic. What if she decided she didn't want to go? What if she got kidnapped on the way here?

What if Hopper won't let her out of the house? What if she realized that this was all stupid and she was better off watching movies at home? Okay, he's spiraling. Eleven would never do that. Not to him. Right?

Right. It's El. She's his soulmate.

And it's in that moment that all the blues around him lighten and drift in one motion, leading him to one path before him. He looks up and sees her, and she's absolutely breathtaking.

Blue suits her perfectly. Her curls are held together with a little blue ribbon that matches her dress, and her eyes are warm and bright under all the lights. She walks toward him, a shy and small smile resting on her face.

"You look beautiful," he says when they meet in the space between. It's a miracle he can even speak. And he means the word in every sense of it—she's amazing and kind and good and wonderful. She's a hero. A really, really pretty hero at that.

"Do you wanna dance?" he asks when he realizes he should probably stop staring.

She smiles sheepishly. "I don't know how."

"I don't, either," Mike replies with a grin. "Do you wanna figure it out?"

And that's what they've always done since they met. Figuring out colors, figuring out how to stop the Demogorgon, figuring out how to stop the shadow monster, and figuring out how to dance. They've always done it together, and that isn't going to change any time soon.

He takes her hand and leads her to the dance floor, feeling warm everywhere. It might be just him imagining things, but Eleven's hand fits perfectly in his.

"Okay, like this," he says, lifting her arms to place them around his neck. He hopes she can't hear how fast his heart is beating. "Yeah. Like that."

They start dancing, slowly and unsure. They soon get into it, no longer bumping feet. Eleven is smiling at him from underneath the lights, warm and soft.

And it's then that Mike realizes that maybe he's found his home, too.

Then he leans forward, their lips meeting somewhere in between. Mike takes it in, holds her close, and presses his forehead against hers. She laughs softly, her breath tingling against his skin.

They stay like that for the rest of the song, even until the next and the next. Mike ignores the stares his classmates are giving him, and he can care less about what they're saying about him and El. They don't know her like he does.

When the Snow Ball ends, Mike finds himself walking out of the school with his fingers intertwined with hers. The stars are out, and the moon shines brightly against the dark sky. It's quiet.

"I had fun," Eleven tells him. "Thank you, Mike."

"Yeah," he says, smiling. "I'm glad we got to go together. I really missed you when you were gone, and I was really hoping we could do this. And we did."

"Me, too," El says. "I wanted to go to you, but—"

"I know," he replies, "and it's okay. Hopper did what he had to do. I understand."

From the driveway, Mike sees Hopper's car pull over. He waves at the man, knowing that his time's up.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he tells her. He places his hands in his pockets, shuffling nervously. "Um. I, uh, so. Good night, El."

She smiles one more time and presses a kiss to his cheek. "Good night, Mike."

And he watches her leave and get into the car, standing there in the cold air as his fingers trace the spot that's still tingling from where her lips had met his skin.

He's laying in bed by the time he realizes with hope growing in his chest that there are always going to be more chapters to their story. It won't end, not really, as long as he's with her and she's with him. They're going to be okay.

They're home.